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ABSTRACT

The author is concerned that teaching strategies based on the values clarification approach (VCA) and on Kohlberg's stage theory of moral development might be premature. The VCA has been adopted widely despite concerns about threats to privacy of participating students, infringement on rights of parents to shape their children's values, and implications of the use of VCA by nontherapists in the nonvoluntary, public school setting. The Cognitive Moral Development Approach (CMDA) has also received widespread attention. It is based on Lawrence Kohlberg's theory that individuals progress through six stages of moral development as a function of genetic maturation and interaction with the environment. It is believed that persons at a given stage will rise to another after they have been exposed to thinking at the next stage above their initial one. Thus, teaching strategies which employ group discussion of moral issues have been developed to facilitate students' moral reasoning abilities. However, the author cautions that such strategies are demanding on the teacher. There is danger of teachers classifying students according to assessed moral stages and then making negative judgments about them. Also, Kohlberg's theory deals with the structure, not the content, of moral thought. (Author/AV)

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MORAL DEVELOPMENT AND ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING: THEORY AND FADDISM*

by

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One of the more difficult problems facing educators is how to translate theory into practice, and considerable amounts of time and effort are devoted to that endeavor. Ironically, less attention is paid to the nature of theory and the questions of whether and/or when theoretical formulations have been adequately clarified and verified and subjected to engineering-type research in the field to serve as the basis for practice. A frequent tendency among American educators is to latch on to appealing approaches to schooling and draw implications prematurely, sometimes inappropriately. Sincere concern for children often underlies the hasty, even careless, application of "theory"; but the result is a curious paradox: A propensity to faddism on the part of some school people that creates an image of almost constant change and innovation in the midst of a steadfast, perhaps stubborn, maintenance of traditional educational forms and practices in the "hidden majority" of American classrooms.

A recent example of faddism has been the widespread adoption of the Values Clarification Approach[1] (VCA), despite serious concerns about such matters as: The potential for relativism as a "hidden curriculum", because VCA proponents eschew universal values and fail to recognize intellectual standards for sound ethical decisions; the similarities between nondirective

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therapy and VCA and the implications of the use of VCA by nontherapists in the nonvoluntary, public classroom setting; the latent threat to the privacy of the participant student or to those whom he or she might mention during Value Clarification activities; the possibility of infringement on parental rights to shape the personal values of their children; the failure of advocates to distinguish between public value issues that are legitimately the concern of the public school and private value issues that are not; the lack of relatively conclusive evidence that VCA has the positive effects attributed to it; a definition of "value" that may be dysfunctional because it could lead to the conclusion that some people lack values; and, the failure to consider value clarification as an aspect of a model of ethical decision-making.[1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 23] Whether all of these prospective indictments of the Values Clarification Approach will hold up is not yet clear. Some advocates of the Approach are now beginning to respond to the many challenges,[8, 9] in contrast with earlier evidence of nonintellectualism, if not anti-intellectualism, on the part of at least one of the leading lights of the movement.[10] Nevertheless, it seems clear that, once again a considerable number of American educators have rushed to adopt a new educational fashion without demanding answers to basic philosophical and empirical questions underlying its use.

The emphasis of the Fifth Annual Inter-institutional Seminar in Childhood Education on moral and ethical development, as stated in the Call for Papers, served as a reminder that another fad related to ethical decision-making is gaining popularity among American educators. The work of Lawrence Kohlberg[11, 12, 13, 14] --often referred to under the rubric "Moral Education", but more

appropriately labeled the Cognitive Moral Development Approach--has received widespread attention in professional journals, at meetings of educators, and even in the popular press.

Kohlberg is a developmental psychologist in the Piagetian tradition. Like Jean Piaget, he believes that cognitive development is a function of genetic maturation and interaction with the environment, and that there are uniform patterns of cognitive development. Where Piaget has proposed four major periods of cognitive development (Sensori-motor, birth to two years; Pre-operational, two to seven years; Concrete Operational, seven to 11 years; and Formal Operational, above 11 years), Kohlberg has (based on Piaget's earlier work[15]) proposed six stages of moral development, falling at three levels: The Preconventional Level includes Stage 1 (ethical decisions are made from a punishment and obedience orientation where the physical consequences determine what should be done) and Stage 2 (an instrumental relativist orientation where what satisfies one's own needs is judged to be good); the Conventional Level includes Stage 3 (an interpersonal concordance orientation where what pleases or helps others is judged to be good) and Stage 4 (a "law and order" orientation where maintaining the social order and doing one's duty take precedence); the Postconventional Level includes Stage 5 (a social contract-legalistic orientation where values agreed on by society are used to judge what is right) and Stage 6 (a universal ethical principle orientation where what is right is a matter of conscience judged by universal principles).

Kohlberg claims that each stage of moral reasoning is higher (leads to more morally sound decisions) than the preceding one and

that the stages of moral reasoning he has identified are universal. Moreover, he claims that, as with the Piagetian cognitive stages, persons move through his moral development stages in order (i.e., people do not skip stages) and that movement to a "higher" stage is dependent upon the development of the appropriate mental ability (e.g., formal operational thought is prerequisite to Stage 3) and appropriate interactions with the environment. Kohlberg also claims that persons have difficulty understanding moral arguments from a moral orientation more than one stage above their own level, but that persons confronted with moral reasoning that is one stage above their own will become dissatisfied with their own thinking and progress to the next higher stage. Based on this line of reasoning, it is proposed that teachers use moral dilemma discussions in the classroom.[16] In these discussions, centered on moral dilemmas posed by the teacher or by students, the students present their views and are to be exposed to higher stage views by other students and the teacher.

There are several concerns about the Cognitive Moral Development Approach (CMDA) that need to be addressed before school people can be sure that the CMDA bandwagon is one they should climb aboard. First, Kohlberg's theoretical work is empirical in nature, not prescriptive. That is, his work has been aimed at formulating principles that describe how moral reasoning develops. Even if the theoretical basis for CMDA had been adequately verified (a point to which we will return), it does not tell us what we should be doing in the classroom. It is worth noting that the descriptive-prescriptive distinction has also been overlooked with Piaget's

theory of cognitive development: While some have used it legitimately as a basis for developing curricula that might correspond to children's periods of development, and thus be more likely to be meaningful for them, others have jumped to the illegitimate conclusion that Piaget's theory implies that the school should try to accelerate movement through the cognitive periods. Piaget has commented in regard to the possibility of accelerating the learning of the concepts of conservation:

> Is it a good thing to accelerate the learning of these concepts? Acceleration is certainly possible but first we must find out whether it is desirable or harmful . . . . Perhaps a certain slowness is useful in developing the capacity to assimilate new concepts . . . . [B]lindly to accelerate the learning of conservation concepts could be even worse than doing nothing.[17]

Kohlberg's claim[13] that research evidence suggests that a large proportion of the population do not attain the level of cognitive development necessary for the Stage 5, Postconventional Level of moral reasoning is a matter for concern--if the research findings are valid, as casual observation suggests they are, and if one accepts the assumption that each moral stage in his schema represents better moral reasoning than the prior one. However, there have been strong challenges to Kohlberg's reliance on a Kantian philosophical underpinning for his higher stages position. (See Shaver and Strong[4] and Fraenkel[18, 19] for citations.) Some persons have even wondered whether, if it is unlikely that people will advance to the Postconventional Level, it might not be better for the society to have them remain at Stage 3 (interpersonal concordance, "good boy, good girl" orientation) rather than try to advance them to the Stage 4, "law and order" orientation.

that
The point is/even in the face of societal needs, descriptive propositions should not be considered prescriptive by school people. And, in addition, philosophical assumptions need to be examined before their imperatives are accepted as the basis for school practices.

The call for caution in jumping on the MCDA bandwagon would be appropriate even if Kohlberg's theory of moral development had been adequately verified, and many scholars claim that it has not--although few dispute the value of his theoretical formulations as a basis for further research and theorizing. A number of critiques have attacked the research evidence for Kohlberg's developmental sequence, for his claim that the theory has cross-cultural validity, and for the inducement of stage development through moral dilemma discussions. (Again, see Shaver and Strong[4] and Fraenkel[18, 19] for references.) Although some critics have raised questions about the adequacy of Kohlberg's Moral Judgment Interview as a data-gathering device, there has been little attention to Kohlberg's general research strategy. Ironically, given his background as a Piagetian developmental psychologist, Kohlberg has not followed Piaget's method of observation in natural settings as a means of theory development and verification. Instead, he and his associates have relied on data gathered in interviews and with paper-and-pencil tests that focus on a limited repertoire of moral dilemmas. Coupled with the other criticisms of the research, this is a serious shortcoming. Conclusions about moral stage development should be couched in terms of the limited measurement tools and assessment contexts. Unfortunately, the advocates of the CMDA are not generally being that discreet.

Aside from doubts that the findings to date establish that moral dilemma discussions can induce stage change, another aspect of the classroom application of CMDA bears further investigation. According to Kohlberg, individuals will not understand moral arguments more than one stage beyond their own, and confrontation with arguments one, but no more than one, stage above one's own is essential for stage change. To apply these propositions in the classroom, the teacher would need to be able to identify each student's moral stage and, in the course of discussions, either phrase responses that were one moral stage above each student's comments and/or arrange for responses by one-stage-higher students. Not only is the Moral Judgment Interview difficult to use for assessing stages, but the management of discussions to meet the "one stage higher" requirement would be very demanding. Interestingly, these two constraints (identifying the students' moral stages and furnishing appropriate stage responses) have been dropped from recent suggestions for conducting moral dilemma discussions.[16, 20] This omission suggests that the theory is of dubious validity; or the discussion techniques that are now being proposed to meet the realities of the classroom are less likely to be effective. Is the CMDA being diluted in its classroom application to the point where it will be difficult to distinguish it from past recommendations (e.g., by Oliver and Shaver[21]) that students be involved in the discussion of moral issues?

Another concern is important from the point of view of teachers and other curriculum developers. Kohlberg has addressed moral reasoning from the perspective of a developmental psychologist in

the Piagetian tradition, and his theory deals with the structure of thought. It does not deal with the content of moral thought--i.e., with the intellectual skills for handling the language, factual, and value problems that students, regardless of their moral stages, should be helped to learn to confront in making ethical decisions. Concentration on applying CMDA in moral dilemma discussions may distract school people from the vital task of helping students develop reasoning skills. In particular, there is reason to fear that the tendency of some advocates of CMDA to refer to it as "Moral Education" may delude teachers into thinking that if they conduct moral dilemma discussions, they have done all there is to do in moral education. That could lead to unfortunate outcomes, even if Kohlberg's theory and its classroom applications had been adequately verified.

One further matter bears mention. A powerful theoretical formulation, such as Kohlberg's, can provide compelling perspectives for perceiving and construing reality. There is a danger that teachers will categorize their students according to their assessed moral stages and then make negative judgments and behave toward them in the dysfunctional ways similar to those that have occurred too often with IQ scores. This apprehension takes on even greater urgency when one considers the doubts still remaining about the validity of the theory of moral stage development and the devices for assessing the moral stages of individuals.

A paper such as this one is open to serious misinterpretation. To some it may appear to be a general, slashing attempt to discredit Kohlberg's work. The intent is quite different: It is to suggest

that Kohlberg's theoretical work is probably being applied to the classroom prematurely. Remember the "structure of the disciplines" movement of the 1950 and 1960s? It was due in large part to Jerome Bruner's formulation, in The Process of Education, of the proposition that students could be taught the basic elements of the academic disciplines at any age level. Perhaps. But should they? In reviewing the unproductive results of years of curriculum development based unquestioningly on the structure of the disciplines proposition, Bruner discussed some of the assumptions in the "formula of faith" that underlay the movement, and concluded:

> The failure to question these assumptions has, of course, caused much grief to all of us.[22]

Calls to resist educational faddism are rarely popular, especially among those caught up in the obvious truth of a movement. Zeal, unfortunately, tends to make people blind to unexamined assumptions and lack of adequate supportive data. Kohlberg's theoretical contributions are provocative and have outstanding potential as principles for understanding an extremely important area of human development, particularly in our democratic society with its assumptions about the dignity of the individual and the role of individuals in impacting the quality of life in the society.

It is not a criticism of his work to point out that Kohlberg's propositions about moral development are still the subject of much controversy, and to maintain that much scholarly research and analysis lie ahead before his formulations will merit the term "theory" in the scientific sense (as used, for example, in "the theory of evolution".) It is not the time to argue for acceptance or disbelief, but for suspension of judgment as to the scientific and

philosophical soundness of his approach. And, the gaps in verification of the empirical and philosophical premises that underly application of CMDA propositions to the classroom are even greater. Significantly, the current CMDA fad raises again the extremely important and difficult question: How can educators avoid, on the one hand, potentially harmful premature acceptance of promising suggestions for curriculum development and practice without, on the other hand, becoming so hesitant of accepting new ideas that the education of youngsters suffers?

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